

HER SEA CHANGE AT THE STRAND

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It's not that being a TV producer was only about the big bucks, the private office with a bathroom, and the spotlight. But after leaving a pretty comfortable job at Channel 7, Victoria Jones had to compromise; she at least kept the spotlight.

Jones left to become executive director for a local theater she feels has great metropolitan appeal, a rich 85-year history, and to top it all off, ample parking: the Strand Theatre.

"I'm not starving," said Jones, euphemistically referring to her change in salary and the difference between working for a media company versus a nonprofit. "I'm taking this for the creative challenge. Sometimes, you have to open yourself to the universe."

Seven months ago, Jones, of Cambridge, left Channel 7 after 20 years. The station was downsizing, and canceling much of its community programming. Jones saw an opportunity for her to pursue her second calling of the stage.

Going from pitching story ideas and working on daily deadlines to pitching calls for monetary donations and working on projects that last for several months, Jones has already seen the good and bad of the nonprofit work.

"I enjoy it 80 percent of the time," said Jones, who says she's a very early 50-something. "It's a different energy. You don't get the accolades you do in TV, but it's not about that."

The Uphams Corner theater was a premier place for cinema and live entertainment in its heyday, hosting Top 40 groups like the Temptations in the '60s. In later years, as the neighborhood's Jewish residents moved out and blacks moved in, the Strand - and the community - fell victim to deferred maintenance, said Jones.

"People remember the Strand community ten years ago when there were lots of gangs and streets weren't well lit," said the Harvard Graduate School of Education alum. "In the last ten years, the community has changed. Something this old with so much potential should be an economic anchor."

While new businesses haven't yet flourished in the Columbia Road/ Uphams Corner corridor, Jones is dedicated to making the Strand a venue for more diversified entertainment, and audiences. Big names such as the Boston Ballet, Berklee College of Music, and Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra of Boston are scheduled to appear on the Strand's old-fashioned marquee for the first time. The Boston Ballet will lead

performance workshops for youth, and the House of Blues will bring its "School House Blues" program. In conjunction with the Strand's 85th anniversary season, Pro Arte will hold its 25th anniversary season at the Strand in October, its first-ever inner-city performance.

"It's a highly unusual thing," said Pro Arte public affairs manager Debbie Rittner. "It's been eons since a quality professional orchestra played in Dorchester."

The Cambridge-based Pro Arte conductor Isaiah Jackson, is the only African-American to lead a Boston-area orchestra, which makes the orchestra's move to the Strand even richer, said Rittner.

The Strand, however, will still hold fast to its staple of traditional black entertainment, including a seminar on blaxploitation films of the 1970s, and dramas, musicals and comedies including "Five on the Blackhand Side."

"We'll keep our tried and traditional plays, but then there are artists who never had a chance to display their works," said Jones.

Prior to Jones's tenure, the executive director position had been empty for about four years. With the help of an active board, the Strand was maintaining, but not thriving. The continuous change in leadership has taken its programming and goals in so many directions, there's been no clear identity. On Jones's list of goals is using 20 years' worth of local and nationally known contacts to garner support for programs including the Morning Series, which brings students to the theater. She also hopes to bring in professional playwrights, artists, and stage engineers to get students interested in the rigamarole of the theater entertainment industry.

"When you have a grand theater like this, you want to do things on a grand scale," she said.

Sound stage; Dorchester's Strand, new director open curtain to a brighter future

ARTS & LIFESTYLE

Mary Jo Palumbo

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To enter the Strand Theatre in Uphams Corner is to encounter its past.

The original Wurlitzer organ - billed as the first in Boston - is showcased behind glass in the lobby. Posters from bygone shows promote performances by Cab Calloway, Dizzy Gillespie and Count Basie. Huge mirrors framed by elaborate gilded moldings reflect the theater's earliest days as a vaudeville and film palace.

As the Strand prepares to celebrate its 85th anniversary in January, a new director aims to recognize the theater's past with a historic designation, and set a course for its future.

The appointment of former Channel 7 TV producer Victoria Jones marks a significant step for the nonprofit arts center, which has been without a director since 1998, when Geri Guardino left to head First Night Boston.

"We have to bring the Strand into the 21st century," said Jones. "That's a big challenge. We need to get this theater in sound fiscal and physical condition. Our biggest priority is renovations."

Located in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, the Strand has long struggled to attract a broad audience and the funds needed to maintain its aging facility, with broken air conditioning, a leaking roof, peeling paint and crumbling plaster.

After four years without an executive director, the theater's programming and visibility have slipped. Jones aims to tackle these problems by expanding fund-raising, leadership initiatives and cultural offerings. The 85th birthday celebration will kick off with a fund-raising drive, Jones said.

"The first step is getting the goodwill of the community on your side," said Jones. "That's half the battle."

Jones joins the theater with an unusual background for nonprofit arts management. An executive producer at WHDH-TV (Ch. 7) for 20 years, Jones left in December 2001 when her job was reconfigured during a downsizing.

She believes her experience as a producer covering cultural and neighborhood issues offers a fresh perspective for the Strand, which has for years provided strong cultural

programs for youths.

"My years producing programs dealing with community issues has taught me that much of this work is about personal stories - about kids becoming actors," said Jones. "A community theater is about many, many personal stories."

When it opened on Armistice Day in 1918, the 1,400-seat theater was described in the Boston Traveler as "Boston's first great movie palace," with its grand chandeliers, gilded Corinthian columns and Grecian figures carved in relief on the theater's vast domed ceiling.

Through the years, Fanny Brice, Milton Berle, Al Green, Tommy Dorsey, the Temptations and the Boys Choir of Harlem all performed at the Strand. The theater was shuttered in the late '60s after falling into disrepair, and obtained by the city of Boston in the early '70s through eminent domain. It reopened in 1979 as the Harriet McCormick Center for the Arts.

Jones is working with the Boston Preservation Alliance to gain a historic designation for the theater. If that happens, the Strand would be added to the state and national registers of historic places and become eligible for state preservation funds.

"The Strand is both a historic space and a cultural center for the community," said Albert Rex, director of the Boston Preservation Alliance. "There are opportunities here to promote its preservation."

To augment the Strand's paltry \$600,000 annual budget, Jones has organized the Friends of the Strand Theatre, a fund-raising group. A film society also was established to raise money for a projection system, which would expand the theater's capacity to show films. Jones hopes to begin programming international films regularly.

Three new staffers - a marketing director, an events planner and a program coordinator - recently doubled the Strand's three-person staff. Community leaders are being solicited in an attempt to expand its board of trustees from seven to 12 members.

The theater, which has no endowment or reserve funding, has grant proposals pending with Citizens Bank, Verizon and the Cloud Foundation, a new group in Boston with a focus on cultural groups that serve youths.

On the programming end, Jones hopes to re-establish some of the successful collaborations that brought such dynamic groups as Mark Morris and the National Dance Company of Senegal to the theater in the 1980s and early '90s, through local presenters such as Dance Umbrella and World Music.

Jones has been talking to Jeremy Alliger, founder of the now-defunct Dance Umbrella, about renewing such co-presentations. And community programs are planned with Boston Ballet, the House of Blues and the Berklee College of Music.

Last month, in celebration of its 25th anniversary season, the Pro Arte Chamber

Orchestra of Boston performed at the Strand for the first time. This month's programming includes Asian American comics, Haitian cultural concerts and gospel musicals. The musical comedy "When a Woman is Fed Up" runs from Wednesday to Saturday. And a hip- hop performance by the Floor Lords is scheduled for Nov. 30.

Jones also plans to rent the theater for more community meetings, receptions and weddings.

"We are looking at the potential of what the Strand can become," said Jones. "This is more than just a theater. This is a community space for a wonderful gathering of cultures."

Caption: NEW ACT: Victoria Jones, the new director of the Strand, holds a picture showing what the theater looked like in the old days, above with Jones at the helm, the historic theater looks to the future. Staff photos by Ted Fitzgerald

Dorchester Reporter

"The News and Values Around the Neighborhood"

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All That Glitters

**In November 1918, the Strand Theatre Set the Standard
for New England's Movie Palaces**

By Peter F. Stevens

Part one in a two-part series.

On the night of November 11, 1918, the people of Dorchester were celebrating, and Upham's Corner was the place to be. Cheers and honking horns pealed throughout the city, as they had all day. Residents whose faces were streaked with tears of elation hugged one another, for the news that World War One - "The War To End All Wars" - was finally over had arrived at Dorchester's telegraph offices early in the afternoon and was trumpeted in "Extra" editions of all the local newspapers. Germany had surrendered, Dorchester's Doughboys would soon be coming home from the nightmarish trenches of the Western Front, and the town was in a festive mood.

Nathan Gordon was opening his Strand Theatre, on Columbia Road, that night at 8 o'clock, and the people clotting Dorchester's streets all day inevitably headed toward the glittering movie and vaudeville palace, whose marquee pulsed with specially arrayed red, white, and blue lights that testified to America's decisive role in the victory over Kaiser Wilhelm and "the Hun" and drew a horde of moviegoers and curiosity-seekers to the gleaming theater.

Caught up both in the euphoria of victory and at visage of the grandly styled emporium, Boston's newspapers lauded the movie house that Gordon had built. The Boston Traveler gushed: "Telegrams and messages of congratulations on the crowning success of his career are pouring into Mr. Nathan Gordon's office. "The Strand is New England's most beautiful theatre, and Boston and New England have reason to feel proud of this wonderful theatre, and cause for congratulating themselves that Mr. Gordon is a New Englander, and has erected this monument to his career in his home town."

According to many film historians, Gordon was the man who designed the region's early movie map. He was already the owner of 75 movie theaters when the Strand, designed by a Boston architectural firm, bathed Upham's corner in a splash of patriotic light on November 11, 1918.

Gordon had started out in the movie-house business with a diminutive nickelodeon in Worcester in 1903 and had opened Boston's first bonafide movie theater, Washington Street's Olympia, which would one day become the Pilgrim Theatre. In 1916, he scrutinized Marcus Loew's refurbishment of the Music Hall into the Orpheum, which made his own theater appear shabby in comparison. Gordon announced a year or

so later that he intended to build Boston's first million-dollar movie theater & outdo his rival Loew, as well as net a fortune.

Built at a cost of a million dollars - a staggering sum for the era – the Strand's opening-night marquee proclaimed that the feature silent reel was "Queen of the Sea," starring Annette Kellerman, a well-toned silent-screen starlet who gained notoriety for her brief flash of nudity in the film "Daughter of the Gods."

In the silent-film era, a theater's organist was a key ingredient of the viewer's experience, the music swelling or softening with each scene. The Strand featured a massive Wurlitzer organ priced at \$75,000, and for opening night, Gordon had hired organist Arthur Martell, dubbed "America's great motion picture musical interpreter"; he not only provided the musical accompaniment to the film, but also for live headliner Emilie Earle, "the songstress deluxe."

Taking in the opening-night show were 1,800 patrons who gaped at the Strand's huge dome, its vibrant murals, its massive, stained-glass arched windows, a marble aquarium, dazzling chandeliers, shimmering mirrors, sweeping mezzanine, and 100-foot-long lobby.

Architectural historian Douglass Shand Tucci writes: "Certainly, it [the Strand] was, and is, a splendid prototype [of early movie palaces]; a vast cream and gold and crimson temple erected to the glory of 'photoplay' by McGahey and O'Connor after the designs of Funk and Wilcox of Boston.

Its...auditorium, surprisingly intimate and with startlingly good acoustics, was the wonder of its day & most notably...for the rich polychromatic lighting that derived from well over two thousand light bulbs in an age when most homes were still lit by flickering gas jets."

The Strand quickly became the place to be in Greater Boston, lines of people stretching far down the block hours before a show began, eager to take in the "flickers" and vaudeville acts. In the months following the theater's gala opening, locals watched the first-run silent films of D.W. Griffith, R.C. Fields, Rudolph Valentino, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, the Gish sisters, the Barrymores, and many other titans of the movies filled the Strand's massive screen. Later, the "talkies" debuted in the Dorchester theater with the Marx Brothers' film "Coconuts."

Vaudeville lovers also streamed into the Strand throughout The Roaring Twenties, mesmerized by such stars Milton Berle, Fannie Brice, Fred Allen, Jack Haley and Eddie Bracken. Understandably popular on the theater's stage was Ray Bolger (later the Straw Man, in "The Wizard of Oz"), who grew up in Dorchester.

The Golden Age of America's movie palaces were in full swing in the 1920s, and nowhere was that fact more discernible than on Upham's Corner. Change, however, loomed for both the Strand and its legions of patrons. The crash of the stock market in 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression would reshape the Strand's role from a glittering symbol of the Roaring Twenties to a haven for people wracked by the economic woes of the 1930s and seeking a few hours' solace in front of the Dorchester Theater's movie screen.

(Peter F. Stevens' latest book, *The Voyage of the Catalpa: A Perilous Journey and Six Irish Rebels' Flight to Freedom*, Carroll & Graf, is available at bookstores and at amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com)